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Editorial: How did toxic mine sludge flood Southwest Colorado, many Texans' home away from home?

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In southwestern Colorado's summer season, old mining trails turn into four-wheeling trails. Old mining towns open their arms and motels. Rivers and valleys host people from all over, but especially Texans trying to escape the relentless heat for just a moment.

From Ouray to Telluride, Silverton to Durango, tourists come for the scenery and mountain air. They bring their fishing rods, kayaks and hiking boots. Importantly for the locals, they also pack credit cards and cash.

This annual dynamic, usually in high season, is under assault this year and from a most unexpected source. As Ronald Reagan explained in his nine most terrifying words in the English language: "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."

It has been more than a week since Environmental Protection Agency workers breached a dirt wall in an abandoned mine, releasing 3 million gallons of toxic wastewater into Cement Creek, which flows into the Animus River. As mine waste, the water was laced with dangerous levels of arsenic, cadmium, lead and other heavy metals.

From the Gold King mine near Silverton, the highly acidic, orange-yellow plume oozed south through the beautiful San Juan National Forest to picturesque Durango and then to Farmington, N.M., turning west through the sovereign Navajo Nation and to the San Juan River into Utah.

Left in its wake were metal pollution and few answers from federal officials. After several days of angry questions, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy took responsibility and scheduled a trip southwest. Colorado and New Mexico issued disaster declarations. The Navajo Nation declared an emergency with 16,000 people, 30,000 acres of crops and thousands of livestock barred from their essential river water.

The unsightly plume fades from dilution as it head downstream toward Lake Powell in Utah, one of the many reservoirs that depend on these rivers. Yet the plume isn't the real problem; it's the metals in the waters.

Federal officials say they expect the toxins to settle into the river sediment. For now, that should allow reopening of more water to recreation and drinking. Unfortunately, the contaminants are just as likely to be stirred up again by rain or other changes in river flow; they will not stay dormant forever.

The Gold King had been the subject of a federal-local tug-of-war for 25 years. The feds wanted to apply its Superfund program to cleaning up mine wastewater left behind decades ago. Locals resisted because such a designation would stifle economic investment and place a stigma on the region. Tourism, after all, is a \$19 billion industry in Colorado.

Meanwhile, all along these vital rivers, outrage grows at the EPA and its inability to speak clearly and honestly about water quality, safety and how and why this happened. McCarthy is "absolutely, deeply sorry that this ever happened" and has promised an investigation into how her workers, trying to stop a trickle of tainted water, instead let loose a flood.